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# THEODORA

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# THEODORA:

## A CHRISTMAS PASTORAL.

BY

FRANCIS HOWARD WILLIAMS.

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PHILADELPHIA:

J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.



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## DEDICATORY.

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I THINK some lives there be that weave a thread  
Of God's own sunlight through the woof of Time;  
Whose presence permeates a wintry clime  
With summer's sense of joy; whose generous bread  
Is cast upon the waters. Such have fed  
The deepest human hunger, and my rhyme,  
Freighted like some quaint mediæval chime  
With Heaven's blessing, would to such be wed.  
Take, then, this slender tribute from my hand;  
Mayhap the bud may one day break to flower;  
Yet, if not so, thy love will leap the bars  
That hedge fruition in a barren land,  
And still thy soft eyes on my life shall shower  
A light as holy as the patient stars.





THEODORA:  
A CHRISTMAS PASTORAL.


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HIME, chime,  
Chime, chime,  
Louder and lower,  
Now farther, now nearer,  
Chime, chime,  
Faster and slower,  
Now fainter now clearer,  
On to eternity  
Swinging forever,  
Time, time,  
Time, time,  
Wondrous maternity,

Always and never  
Dying and born again,  
Chime, chime,  
Morning and eventide,  
Evening and morn again,  
Chime, chime,  
Youthful at dawning,  
At sunset so old,  
Youthful at eventide,  
Aged at dawn,  
Ceaselessly yawning  
To swallow the beautiful,  
Stolid as fate  
Yet as fleet as the fawn ;  
Early and late,  
For the false and the dutiful,  
Bearing the chalice  
To lips that are cold ;  
Conquering malice  
And human malevolence,  
Spreading a pall  
Over love and benevolence,

Hiding endeavor  
Forever, forever,  
All, all,  
With a mantle of mould.

 TIME, time,  
Time, time,  
On thy tide bearing  
The young and the daring,  
The timid and old;  
Revealing despairing  
And pitiful faces,  
By torches that, flaring  
And flung from their places,  
Go out as a tale that is told.  
Rhyme, rhyme,  
Weave me a story  
Of sorrow and glory,—  
Of glory as golden,  
And sorrow as olden  
As time, time;

Make me a history,  
Show me a mystery,  
Rare, rare  
As a song from above  
Or a picture of Love,  
Fair, fair,  
In a setting of gold.



HIS was the song the old clock sang, as slow  
The ancient hands seemed lovingly to trace-  
Weird shapes and shadows from the firelight  
glow

Athwart the numbers on the ancient face.  
Aunt Hester's chair creaked out a sleepy rhyme  
As back and forth she rocked in reaches long,  
The while her needles marked a counter-time  
To the quaint phrasing of the old clock's song.

Snug in its disc of comfortable light,  
The lamp spoke Christmas welcome to us all,

While oak and resinous pine gave each its mite  
To fling a ruddier halo on the wall.  
And we were five,—Aunt Hester, Dora, John,  
Faith and myself. Since childhood's hour when we  
Were full of childish games which time anon  
Chills to decorum, we had thought no tree  
Could bear its fruitage of unguessed delights  
To glad the season elsewhere than here;  
And as our faith in genial Christmas sprites,  
And saints more genial, lessened, the good cheer  
And merry-making of the olden time  
Waned nothing. And each season had we come,  
Finding life silenter but more sublime  
Within the atmosphere of hearth and home.

Faith was my sister; John our cousin, far  
Removed in blood, but nearer in our love  
Than brothers oft; and Dora? Dora's star  
Had risen hid in mist; below, above,  
Where we knew not, only that it was bright,  
And she as good as fair. A mystery clave

Unto her, and when we had sought new light  
    Touching her origin, Aunt Hester gave  
But meagre answer, and with bended brow  
    And lip compressed, showed how our words dis-  
        turbed  
The quiet of her mind. We questioned now  
    No more, and curiosity, once curbed,  
Grew patient of the rein. We could but find  
    In Dora (Theodora was her name  
But Dora sounded tenderer,) the kind  
    And loving sister, evermore the same.

So, as we sat and kept the custom born  
    Long, long ago, to watch the deep'ning night,  
And see the eve of Christmas melt to morn,  
    A sense of awe commingled with delight  
Possessed our souls. And, wondrous in its tone,  
    The ancient clock sang louder, then so low  
Its cadence sank that on our ears a moan  
    Vibrated in a rhythmic ebb and flow :





TICK, tock,  
Tick, tock,  
There's never a soul  
That findeth the goal  
Till over the sleeper  
The hand of the reaper  
Hath swept.  
Tick, tock,  
Tho' only a clock,  
My heart in its altar  
Hath kept  
The truth, the devotion,  
The rhythm and motion,  
The knowledge worth knowing  
Of life,  
That, ebbing and flowing  
Like tides of the ocean,  
Change never, nor falter  
In coming or going,—  
In peace or in strife.



ND as the song hung trembling in the air,

We gazed upon the quaintly carven wood

Surmounting the clock's case, and noted there,

Once more, the wreath of myrtle, like a hood  
Drooping across the face; for since the years

Were dim in distance to our memory's eyes,  
No Christmas came, whether or joy or tears

Were more akin to us, than our surprise  
Found fresh food ever to find ever thus

A new wreath of sweet myrtle, like a crown,  
Placed on the old clock's brow. But still to us

Aunt Hester gave no answer, or to drown  
All unwished questions, put us off with show

Of explanation, vacant to the mind,—  
So vaguely general that our thirst to know

The wherefore piqued us evermore to find  
New form of questioning.

Why should we ask?

The time was one of feast and merriment;  
She decked the clock because she found the task


Of decking it so easy, and it lent  
New beauty to its polished panels, brown  
With scores of Christmases to newly wear,  
Each year, in royal state, its royal crown.  
Why should we ask?

And, so met, in despair  
At length our questions ceased. Yet still full well  
We knew there was a reason in her heart,  
Which haply she should find it meet to tell  
Anon, and thus the wreath became a part  
Of our observance of the day. So now  
We looked upon it lovingly, while slow  
Around that crowned and venerable brow  
The melody still kept its ebb and flow:





LOW, flow,  
Flow, flow,  
Winter and Summer,  
Autumn and Spring,  
Over the grasses  
They come and they go,  
Go, go,

And every new-comer  
Is eager to bring  
A joy as he passes,  
A pledge of his might;  
The purple and glow  
Of the clustering masses,  
The mantle of white  
And immaculate snow,  
    Snow, snow,  
The flame that discloses  
The heart of the night,  
The blossom and flower  
Of Summer, whose power  
All other surpasses,  
In love ever firmer  
Tho' fleet in his flight;—  
The Summer that whispers  
“Delight!” to the roses,—  
The roses that murmur  
To Summer: “Delight!”

HEN, as we hearkened to the song, Faith's care  
For household duties, doubly deep to-night  
By reason of the Christmas-time, and rare  
With promise of some triumph of her might  
And skill in cookery, drew her away  
To those mysterious realms below-stairs, where  
Undreamed of odors and steams unctuous play  
In appetizing wavelets in the air.

John, too, found need (he always found a need  
To follow whither Faith went) once again  
To rack the cider; (he who ran might read  
The mystery in that); so, therefore, when  
The clock next sang, there were but left we three,  
Aunt Hester, Dora and myself, to hear  
The rise and fall of its weird melody,  
So far away, yet evermore so near.

ING, sing,  
Sing, sing,  
A beautiful boy  
Came over the flowers,  
Came over and passed  
Like a vision of joy  
To invisible bowers ;  
Came softly, and fast  
On the vanishing hours  
Took wing.

HETHER some cadence pregnant in the ear  
Awoke a memory of vanished days,  
Or whether there was that within the clear,  
Sweet murmur of the song that touched the haze  
Of reverie about us and let down  
The bars of reticence, I know not ; yet  
Upon Aunt Hester's brow the half-formed frown  
Had passed away, and in its stead was set,  
Bright as a star, a diadem of peace ;

And, looking steadfastly at Dora, she  
Said softly : “ Patient waiting brings release  
From every fetter of necessity.  
You, child, have questioned oftentime to learn  
Whence you are come, and all the rest to know  
The wherefore of my actions, sometimes stern,  
Yet ever love-dictated. This brave show  
Of green at Christmas,—my care thus to grace  
The ancient clock with myrtle, and at eve  
To watch the shadow fall across its face ;—  
All this you’ve wondered over. By your leave  
You shall ne’er wonder more.”

And as she spoke  
I saw how Dora trembled, and the fire  
Which lived beneath her eyelids leaped and woke  
Another flame that lit her cheek, and higher,  
Was quenched where it began. Then she grew pale.  
And well I noted what a sad, sweet smile  
Aunt Hester’s face wore as she told her tale,  
The ancient clock low murmuring the while.

## Aunt Hester's Story.

---



YOU both remember hearing how the dam  
Which lies behind the village, storing force  
To nerve the mills in thirsty summer, calm  
But dangerous in strength, once from its course  
Swerved the quick river, and in mad career,  
As freshets from the mountains in the Spring  
Pressed from behind, swept on, till far and near  
Houses and barns lay wrecked, and everything  
In the flood's path was desolate. That day  
Is fixed in many memories ; in my own  
It burns an endless sorrow, though I pray  
Not now an unavailing one. You've grown  
To womanhood and manhood since that time,  
But both have heard how, of the noble men  
Who offered a self-sacrifice sublime  
On the destroyer's altar, dying when



Strong living arms were powerless to save,  
None nobler than my husband worked and died,  
Nor, dying, to his race a pattern gave  
Of more divine devotion.

When, a bride,  
I laid within his brawny hand my hand,  
And felt how firm its touch, and heard the word,  
“I, Henry, take thee, Hester,” that same grand  
Power of love ineffable that spurred  
His soul to noblest effort, shed its light  
Around me and about me, and I knew  
My husband for a hero.

Ah, how bright  
The years were then,—five golden years that drew  
Our hearts into a union closer yet,  
And gave an added holiness to life,—  
The jewel of motherhood that God had set  
Within my royal diadem of Wife!

Here was our home, this room our sitting-room ;  
The shy clematis hid itself as now

And clambered at the lintel ; there, where bloom  
The potted roses on the sill and bow  
To every waft of air, the roses grew  
And bowed as gently.

Thus we lived, till came  
That awful night, when on the gale there flew  
A cry of death, and leaping like a flame,  
The torrent sped across the fields.

Away  
To aid in saving sprang my husband, strong  
To battle with the waters ; but the day  
Which dawned on wreck and ruin brought along  
The warrant of my doom. He had been seen,—  
My Henry,—doing work of half a score  
One moment in the abyss that lay between  
Mad flood and flood. *I* saw him nevermore !

Thus was I widowed ere one summer's rain  
Had taught my heart the meaning of life's storms,  
Or grief had given the power to wear a pain  
In long enduring silence. So the forms

Which my great sorrow took were stern denial  
Of God's own goodness, and a stubborn mind  
To bow not to his mandate. A new trial  
Was needed, and as they who seek oft find  
In most repellent structures the sought pearl,  
So I must needs be broken yet again  
By grief to find my peace.

Our little girl—  
Ours, for I had not dropped the title then—  
Grew paler than her wont, and ceased to play;  
Forsook delight of sunlight and of air,  
And as some fragrant flower fades away  
At coming of the frost, so, in despair,  
I saw her slipping from me. Days to weeks  
Fled onward, weeks to months, till Winter's hold  
Was loosed on tree and shrub, and all the creeks  
Sped on again to where the fields enfold  
The shining river like a silver band  
Woven through russet tapestry. The earth  
Grew blithe in Spring, and yearning to expand  
Her inner love to love's new outer birth,

Bloom'd 'neath the kiss of sunshine into quick  
And warm maturity; the Summer fled  
Herself as fleetly, and in bowers thick  
With her own gorgeous panoply, lay dead  
Ere we had half embraced her. Autumn came,  
Lived a brief life replete with gold and glow,  
And, ere our lips could speak her lovely name,  
Died on a bed of fallen leaves and snow.  
Then, as the days came close to Christmas-tide,  
The child whose eyes had shed the only ray  
To keep my wounded spirit from the wide,  
Tossed sea of desolation, sank away  
Ever and ever weaker; and my moan  
I made in whispers, praying she might live  
With such hushed vehemence as they alone  
Who once have loved, and loving lost, may give  
Or understand the giving of.

And oft

I heard the old clock on the thread of time  
Slow telling off the beads; and from aloft  
Where sky is wed to sky, a voice sublime  
Bore in upon me whispers sad as tears.

A terror seized upon me, and my will,  
Stubborn till now, broke 'mid a world of fears,  
And I cried out: "Have mercy, Lord, nor fill  
This dread cup to the brim!"

Still, still the flame  
Burned lower, and I saw a pallor chase  
The life from cheek and brow, and strange lines  
came,  
Unearthly lines in her unearthly face.

Till one day, as in quest of Paradise,  
The sun rolled down the West, all gold and red,  
An angel put the light out in her eyes,  
And I was sitting silent with my dead.

Ah me, ah me, 'twas twenty years ago,  
Yet seems but yesterday. Time grows so fleet  
As we grow older, and each hasting dawn  
Comes closer to the sunset. It were meet  
I pause a little, for I scarce may trust  
My heart to bide the telling of my grief,

For hearts will sometimes falter tho' they must  
Go on at last to breaking or relief.

[Here pausing for a moment in the tale,  
Aunt Hester pressed her temples wearily,  
As though some memory, struggling to prevail,  
Must be thrust back and conquered.

Cheerily

At the same moment Faith and John appeared  
Within the doorway, full of conscious pride  
Of duty well performed. And, as they neared  
My chair, I plucked John's sleeve and spake aside  
Of what it was that hushed our lips and led  
To this unwonted silence and repose.  
Then good Aunt Hester, taking up the thread  
Of her sad story, wove it to its close.]

Some souls there be (blessed that such should be)  
That meet affliction half-way, well content  
To garner where they've sown tho' misery  
Deck out the harvest.

Mine, tho' well I meant  
Ever to bow to Heaven, was never thus

Submissive, and I railed against my fate,  
And beat my pale hands in tumultuous

Frenzy upon the bars. Love bade me wait,  
And still I railed at Love; and as the days

Came to their shortest I grew wellnigh mad  
And on the eve of Christmas, as my praise


I strove to offer, I thought on the glad,  
Gay hearts that then praised also, and I wept,


Alas! such bitter tears. Then I rose up,  
And would have flung the holy book I kept


Beside me far away, for this dread cup  
Was more than I could drink.

Yet, as I stood

Irresolute, the cadence of a song,  
Sung by the clock, enchained me ere I would,  
And bore my being on its tide along:

AIT, wait,  
Pitiful fate  
Bringeth thee joy,  
And the golden gate  
Stands open to Love,  
Tho' he cometh late.

AIT, wait,  
Sorrow nor hate  
Ne'er shall destroy  
Nor leave desolate,  
For God is above,  
And God is great.  
Wait!

ND while I paused, half lost in wonder, came  
A gentle tapping at the outer door,  
And, as I opened it, the dying flame  
Of the hearth's embers leapt and seemed to soar  
In sudden exultation.



On the sill

Stood motionless two children, one a boy  
Divinely beautiful as dreams which thrill

Celestial sleepers with celestial joy ;  
And at his side a little girl, whose eyes

Looked trustfully in mine. Then, as I spread  
My arms to welcome them in glad surprise,

The girl was there, but, like a vision fled  
To lovelier realms, the boy was gone.

The snow

Bore tiny footprints, and as close I bent  
To mark their course, they seemed to gleam and glow,  
For each was filled with flowers, whose perfume  
lent

To Winter all the redolence of Spring.

I led the girl within. The voice of Fate  
Resounded in mine ears, and lingering

In dying echoes whispered : " God is great !"

Then wreathing 'round the clock the flowers which  
dressed

The earth where'er that foot divine had trod,

I took the little wanderer to my breast,  
And called her—Theodora, Gift of God.

---

Aunt Hester ceased, nor spake one other word,  
Only held forth her hand to Dora, who  
Stood motionless and rapt, as one who heard  
Some far, unfathomable song borne through  
The phalanx of the ages. O'er her brow  
The hair hung heavily, and fashioned there  
A shadow soft as sleep, that trembled now  
As trembled on her lips a silent prayer.

I dared not speak; there was too much of awe  
In Dora's mien. Against the ancient clock  
She leaned, and as I gazed on her, I saw  
How her slight fingers tightened at the shock  
Of each pulsation of her fluttering heart.  
Across the antique panel her white arm  
Gleamed, for her sleeve, worn loose, had fallen apart  
And left it bare from wrist to shoulder, warm  
With throbbing life but chaste as marble.

Now

The great log on the hearth, burned to the core,  
Brake suddenly, as though it would endow

The scene with its own glow ; a mighty roar  
Came from the chimney's throat, and left and right

The sputtering sparks leapt on the ample stone,  
And flung the crimson halo of their light

'Round Dora's figure, standing there alone.

Then the clock sang, in tones which seemed to roll

From lip to lip of some angelic choir,

The anthem of a liberated soul

Touched with the glory of celestial fire :



CHIME, chime,  
Chime, chime,  
Linking to-morrow  
To æons of ages ;  
Chime, chime,  
Sponging out sorrow

From all the marred pages  
Of time, time ;  
Onward the river  
Is flowing, still flowing,  
Liquid as rhyme,  
Rhyme, rhyme,  
Forging a chain  
That has never an ending,  
Lost, and alone  
With eternity blending,—  
Back to the Giver,  
And on to His throne.  
Evermore glowing  
Where myriads sing  
Peace, and the reign  
Of The King.



THEN in the silence to our ears was borne  
The stroke of midnight, and, as angels sing,  
We heard strange voices welcoming the morn,  
The morning of the birthday of The King.

















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